

JOHN RATH HOUSE

**2703 West Logan Boulevard
Chicago, Illinois**

**Preliminary Staff Summary of Information
Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Landmarks
November, 1992**

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Date of Construction: 1907

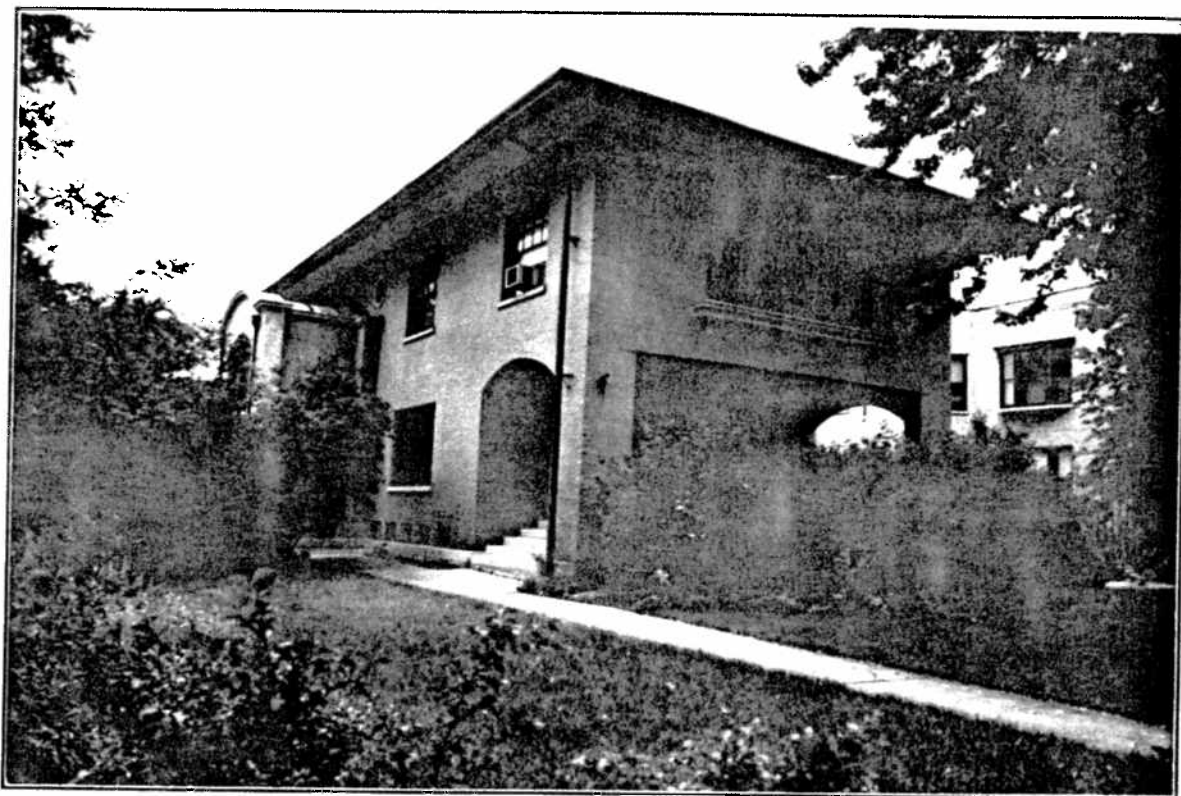
Architect: George W. Maher

The work of George Maher is representative of the attempts by architects at the turn of the century to redefine architectural design. Focused in the Midwest and principally in Chicago, a progressive movement in architecture brought about a variety of approaches toward the creation of an original form of design. Among the architects associated with this movement, Frank Lloyd Wright and the architects of the Prairie school are best known. George Maher was one of several architects -- including Irving Pond, Howard Van Doren Shaw, Robert Spencer, Dwight Perkins, and others -- whose work was equally original. Massive in its overall composition and employing strong geometric forms, the house Maher designed for barrel maker John Rath is emblematic of the architect's theories.

George Maher's Role in the Modern Architecture Movement

George Washington Maher (1864-1926) is often characterized as an architect who worked in the Prairie style, but such a characterization is overbroad and, in fact, misleading. Although he shared some of the experiences and general ideas on architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and other Prairie school practitioners, Maher's work and underlying theories were too personalized to be considered as parts of the broader Prairie movement. More than the work of other progressive architects of the period, the designs of Maher were tempered as much by traditional architectural ideas as by innovation.

Before establishing his own practice in 1888, Maher learned his craft in three prominent offices: Bauer & Hill, J.L. Silsbee, and Adler & Sullivan. The latter two firms are regarded as important in the development of the Prairie school and other innovations in architectural thought and practice. The expressionistic work of Louis Sullivan was a major influence, making Sullivan the spiritual mentor of a generation of progressive designers. Although not as significant an influence as Sullivan, Silsbee's work in the Shingle style marked him as an innovator to whom talented architects were attached. Given the reputation for creativity that Silsbee and Sullivan shared, it was not a coincidence that



The Rath House is set well back from the two street frontages of its corner lot, creating a landscaped setting compatible with its location on the boulevard system. (*John Lee, photographer, for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey*)

Maher joined Frank Lloyd Wright and George Grant Elmslie as draftsmen, first with Silsbee, then later with Adler & Sullivan.

The majority of Maher's commissions were for residences. Concentrations of his designs were built in the Edgewater section of Chicago, the 700- and 800-blocks of Hutchinson Street (also in Chicago), and Kenilworth, the suburb where Maher lived. The architect's social contacts no doubt aided his practice. He was a village trustee and park commissioner of Kenilworth, and belonged to the Union League Club, Chicago Athletic Association, and the American Institute of Architects. Maher was a leading figure in the Chicago Architectural Club, and was a founding member of the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society, begun in 1895.

Maher's earliest work was predominately with frame designs, and reflected the influence of J.L. Silsbee's Shingle style architecture. The picturesque irregularities of the style's exterior elevations, as well as the openness of the interior plan, was a departure from the revival movements that had dominated American architecture until the late nineteenth century. As seen in several designs -- including his own home (433 Warwick Road, Kenil



Maher as depicted in a 1902 caricature. (from *Chicagoans As We See 'em*).

worth; 1893); the John Scales House (840 Hutchinson Street, Chicago; 1894); the Edgar Barrett House (255 Melrose Avenue, Kenilworth; 1897); and houses for the J.L. Cochran subdivision in Edgewater -- Maher employed gables, towers, combinations of surface materials, and other architectural elements, frequently exaggerating them to produce compositions which were original for their exotic and plastic nature.

Although Maher's designs seemingly linked him with the progressive architectural movements of his day, his writings revealed that his thoughts on innovation were tempered by traditional concepts of architecture. In his article "Originality in American Architecture" (*Inland Architect and News Record*, Oct. 1887), Maher noted that American architects enjoyed a fortuitous circumstance in their freedom from the traditional "rules" and historic styles that governed their European counterparts. American architects, he argued, had an opportunity to create an American style. In particular, he praised the work of H.H. Richardson for "[t]he idea of massiveness, imposing centralization, of grouping the novel ideas for the comfort in the interior arrangement [of residences]." However, as seemingly predis-

posed as Maher was to innovation in design, in the same article he spoke favorably of the Colonial Revival style:

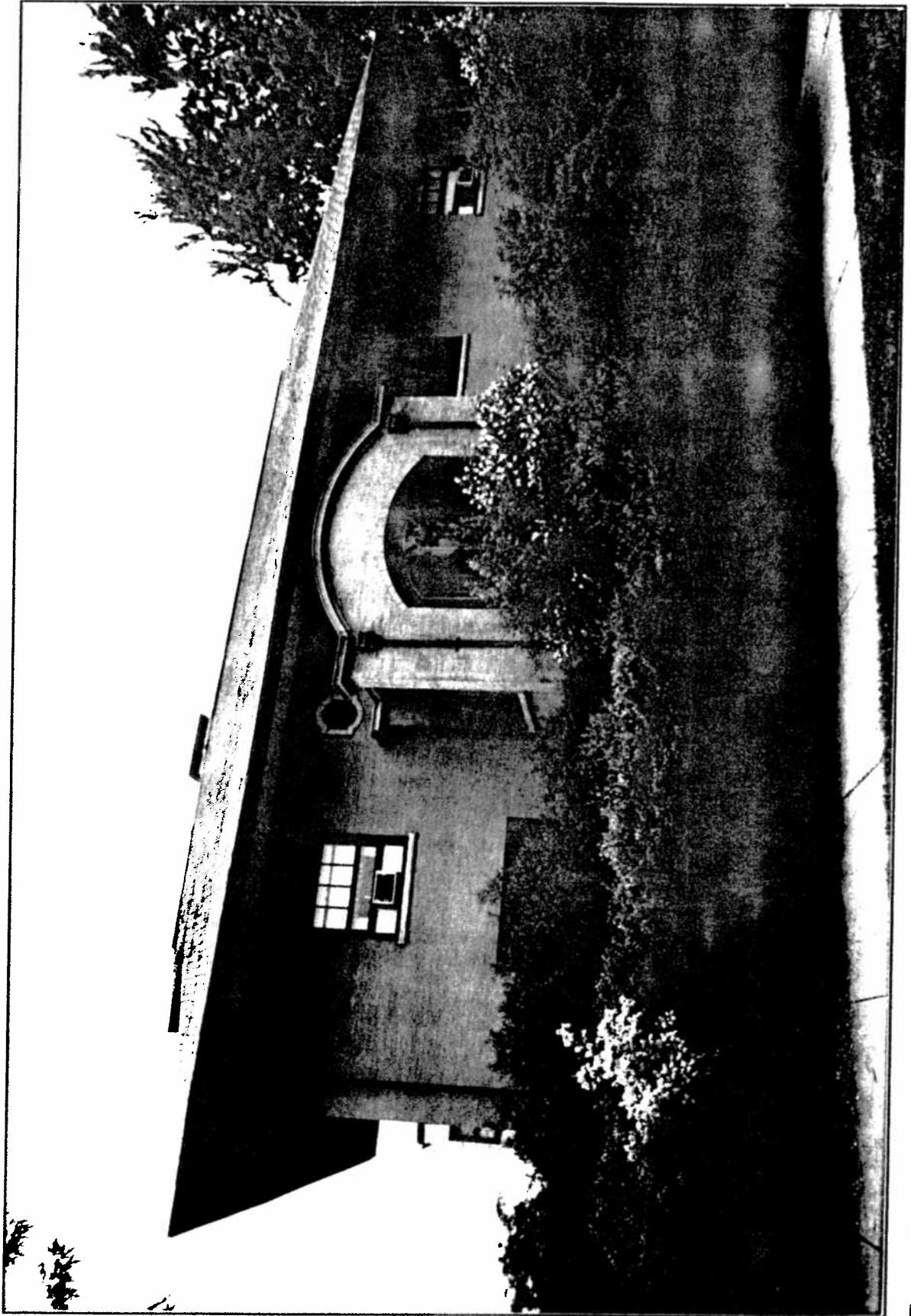
If designed aright (sic) it presents a model for picturesqueness. Rock-faced base, porches plain and devoid of spindle work, gables pierced with windows having small lights, carving worked on solid wood, long sweep of roof pierced with short, massive chimney, it tends to leave the impression of quietness of home rather than a dazed impression of grandeur. . . . This style of building suits the taste of the better class of American people, and if encouraged aright will develop into a style that speaks of home and comfort.

In his support and use of historic design features Maher was among a small number of the architectural innovators of his day. While Wright and others saw historic styles as a point of departure for the design abstractions, Maher incorporated historic references into his compositions in a more literal manner than his contemporaries. In his search for an indigenous "American style" Maher was seemingly attempting to create a new form of architecture relevant to the American experience, but a form which simultaneously recalled traditional domestic forms.

The struggle by Maher to blend innovation and heritage culminated in his design of the John Farson House (217 Home Avenue, Oak Park; 1897), a work recognized as the architect's signature piece and the prototype for many subsequent designs. The house is characterized by its formal symmetry, which controls the more modern aspect of its austere rectilinearity. Frank Lloyd Wright's Winslow House (515 Auvergne Place, River Forest; 1895), a hard-edged symmetrical composition with large, precise window openings, was the inspiration for Maher's design. The formal symmetry, combined with the rectilinearity and the exaggerated massiveness of the exterior walls, gave the Winslow House a visual repose that Maher sought to emulate in the Farson House and later works. Into this overall arrangement, Maher often incorporated a prominent central entry, usually as a projecting square or arch.

The Farson House is also important because it illustrates one of the earliest applications of Maher's "motif rhythm" theory, which was his distinct contribution to the modern movement in architecture. Through this theory Maher attempted to unify a given house design by combining a stylized floral form and a geometric shape to create a dominant visual theme to be used throughout the design. According to Maher, the principle "completely harmonizes all portions of the work until in the end it becomes a unit of composition . . . since each detail is designed to harmonize with the guiding motif which in turn was inspired by the necessity of the situation and local color and conditions" ("Art Democracy," *Western Architect*, March 1910). Its most publicized application was in the residence of James Patten in Evanston (1902; demolished). Maher combined the thistle, which grew wild on the site of the house and also was a reference to Patten's Scottish heritage, and an octagon. The motifs were used, independently and in tandem, to create a decorative motif that was used in everything from the art glass and wall coverings, to furniture and drapes, and even to the shape of a room.

After 1904, Maher began to further refine the Farson model with elements inspired by innovative European architecture. The publication in the United States of works of the British Arts and Crafts movement; the Deutsche Werkstätten and Deutscher Werkbund in Germany; the Wiener Werkstätte (or Secessionists) in Austria; and the Glasgow School in Scotland significantly broadened the visual vocabulary of American architects. Designs by English architect C.F.A. Voysey and Austrian Joseph Maria Olbrich were particularly



The contained block-like massing of the Rath House reflects George Maher's traditional architecture, yet the broad hipped roofs and unadorned cut-out openings suggest his interest in modernist movements of the period. (John Lee, photographer, for the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*).

influential to Maher. Maher was thoroughly familiar with European trends, based on his travels on the continent, the availability of publications illustrating new works, and his attendance at an important exhibit at the German Arts and Crafts pavilion of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held at St. Louis in 1904. Thereafter Maher adopted distinctly European references, including large massive wall treatments, detailed with asymmetrical window placements; use of segmental, or flat, arches with short lateral flanges; and battered, or flared, walls. In using these references, architectural historian H. Allen Brooks observed, that "Maher endeavored to combine the best that contemporary European architecture had to offer, hoping to produce something personal and substantially new." (Brooks, *The Prairie School*, p. 106).

George Maher's reputation is well established as an architectural innovator, but his work was distinct from that of Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie school. The emphasis of Wright and his contemporaries was in the "destruction of the box," doing away with traditional residential plans and forms to create an original approach to architectural design. In contrast, Maher accepted the basic architectural conventions and tried to create an indigenous architectural style through the enhancement of the very conventions eschewed by the Prairie school. While Prairie school houses often appeared as a series of geometric volumes reflecting the free-flowing plan within, Maher's designs conformed to a traditional plan within a conventional box-like volume. Both Maher and Wright spoke of the importance of the function of a design in determining its configuration, but to Maher the function of a house was imbued with traditional values:

This is the right idea of a residence, to have it speak of its function. . . . The true path toward an original style is to follow the dictation of necessity and then to improve upon detail. The interior of this class of building presents comfort in every form. Large, old-fashioned fireplaces, ease of stairs, nooks with settees; heavy oak beams leave the impression of solidity; low ceilings convey the idea of privacy; all contribute to make life a matter of ease. This style of building suits the taste of the better class of American people, and if encouraged aright (sic) will develop into a style that speaks of home and comfort. ("Originality in American Architecture," *Inland Architect and News Record*, Oct. 1887).

Through his highly developed aesthetic sense, Maher was able to blend these traditional notions of home with an innovative design vocabulary to generate an original approach toward design.

In *The Prairie School*, H. Allen Brooks described Maher as an architect who sought "an appropriate architectural expression, a search which led him to seek ideas from the European avant-garde, assimilating these ideas into something which was substantially his own creation" (p. 111). George Maher's designs were an important body of work for their

experimentation in architectural form as well as for their aesthetic qualities. They represent the conscious efforts of a talented architect seeking originality of expression in an era of architectural innovation.

The Rath House Design

Designed and built during the height of George Maher's career, the John Rath House is an excellent illustration of the architect's work. It is a two-story structure, of tan Roman brick and limestone trim, giving the composition an overall hard-edged rectilinear quality. The house is essentially rectangular, with its short sides along the north and south elevations, and is capped by a shallow-pitched hip roof with broad eaves. The residence is set back on its corner lot, where an abundant landscape, in keeping with the greenway character of Logan Boulevard, softens the precise lines of the architecture.

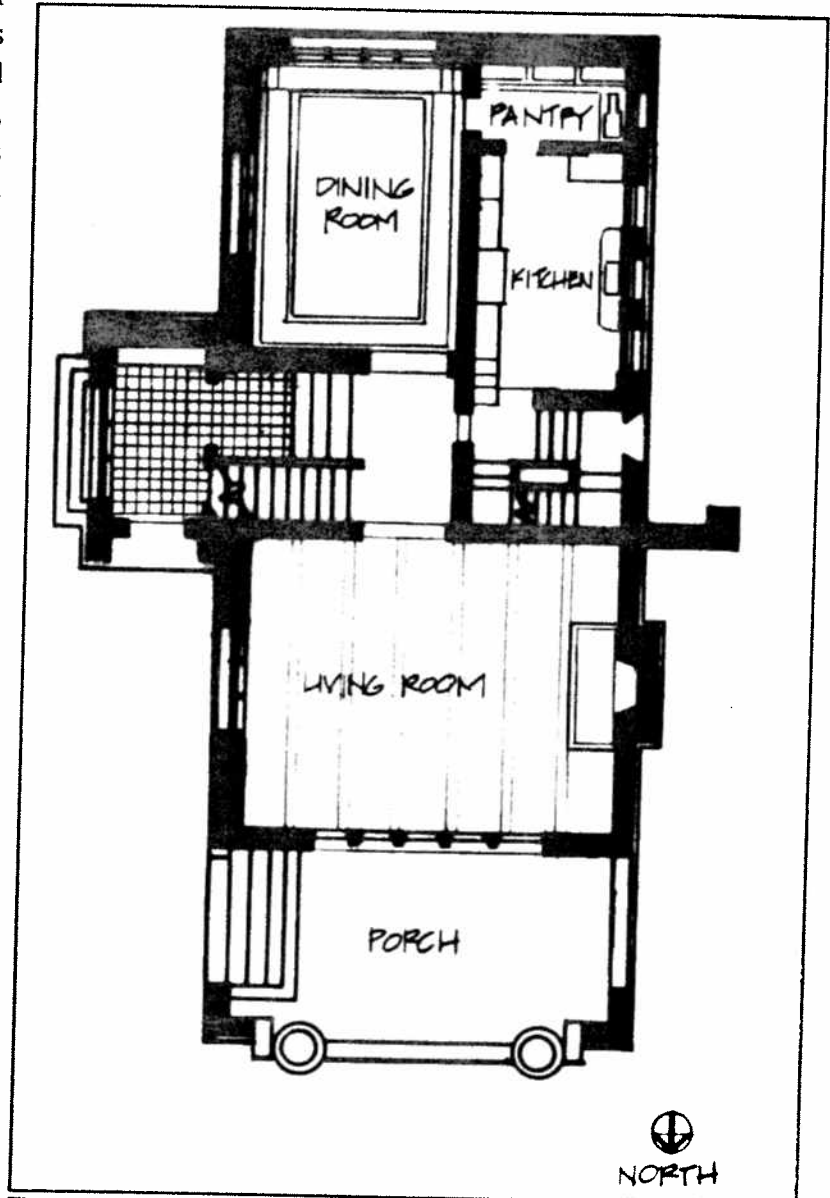
In his work Maher developed the "motif rhythm" theory in which floral elements and geometric shapes were used, independently or in tandem, throughout a structure as unifying decorative elements. The living room fireplace of the Rath House, with its shallow arched profile and its floral motif illustrates Maher's Theory. (from *Inland Architect and News Record*, 1908).



The dual nature of Maher's work, of innovation moderated by tradition, comes through clearly in this residence. Its contained block-like massing and the regular pattern of windows reflects the architect's traditional approach to residential architecture, yet the broad hipped roofs and unadorned cut-out openings suggest his interest in modernist movements of the period. Like many of the modernist architects of his day, Maher favored large expanses of wall. In the Rath design, the clean, precise Roman brickwork emphasizes the planar character of the wall. This expanse of wall is broken by a small entrance wing on the east elevation.

The relationship of interiors and exteriors was important to Maher and other modern architects, and this characteristic is seen in the detailing of the front porch. In typical Prairie school designs, terraces and enclosed porches were often detailed as separate volumes integrated into the fluid floor plans. In the Rath House, the porch is in a conventional location on the Logan Boulevard side of the house; yet, the manner in which the porch is carved out of the larger masonry shell, keeping the porch within the footprint of the rectangular mass, emphasizes the architect's ideas about the sheltering quality of the house. The theme is reinforced by the broad roof eaves.

In keeping with Maher's ideals of domestic architecture, the plan of the Rath House conforms



The ground-floor plan of the Rath House conforms to a traditional arrangement. (Charles Pipal, delineator).

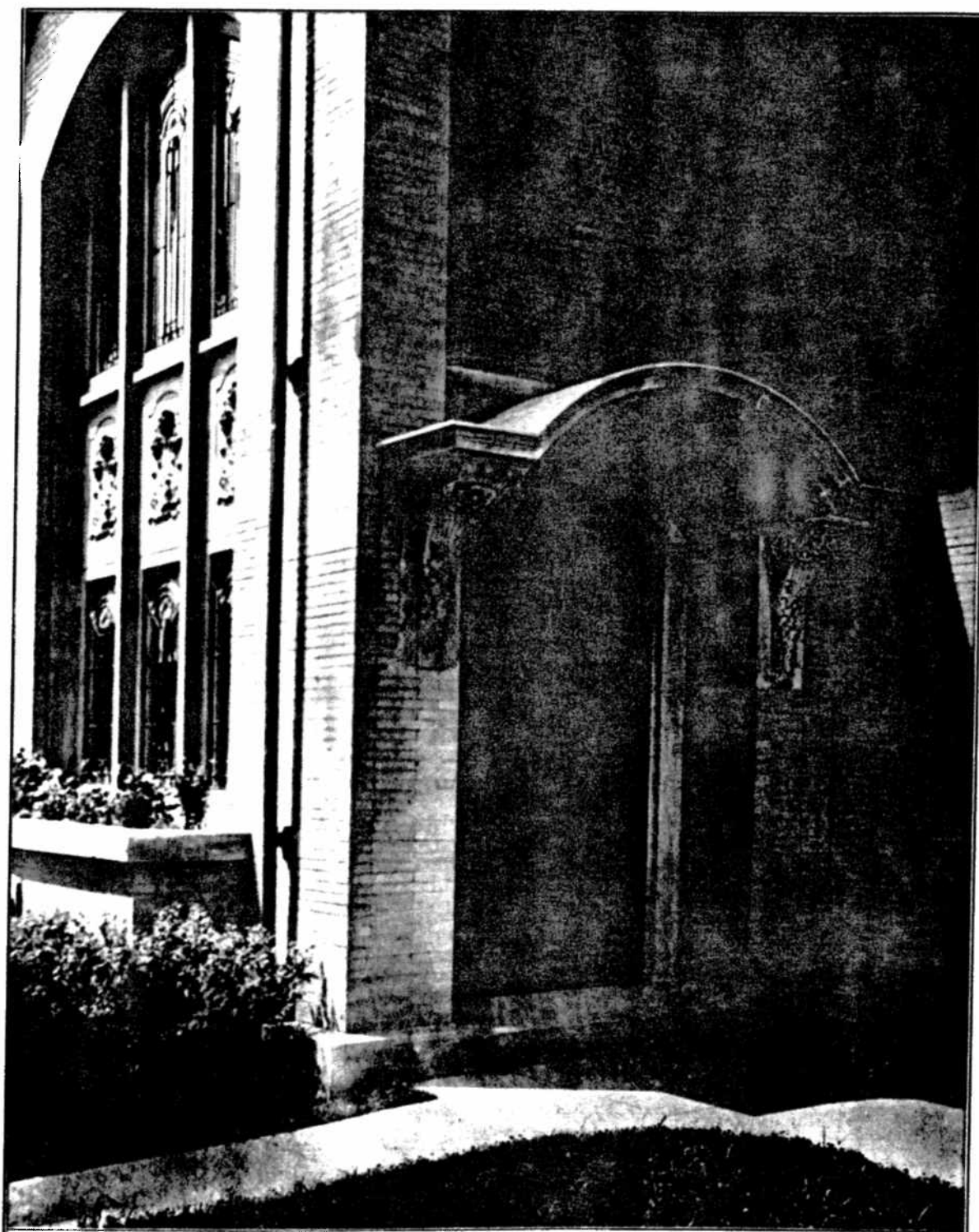
to a traditional arrangement, with the living and dining rooms on either side of the central entrance and stair hall. H. Allen Brooks stated that "comfort and gracious living" characterized Maher's interior arrangements, and the generous size of the principal rooms is in keeping with this description. Decoratively, the motif-rhythm principle appears to have been used on a more limited basis in the Rath House than in other Maher designs. The motif-rhythm for the Rath House incorporates the poppy with a flat arch. The most prominent references to the poppy are in the carvings in the front door; in the art glass windows and the cast opalescent art-glass, mosaic fireplace in the living room; and in the stone ornamental brackets on the exterior of the house. The segmental arch occurs more frequently, such as over the front door and the second-floor window group on the north side of the house, in the living room fireplace, and in various room openings throughout the house. There is little evidence of stenciling or specially designed moldings incorporating the motif.

Previous Owners

The house was built in 1907 for German-American manufacturer, John Rath (1870-1924). Rath emigrated to Chicago with his parents around 1884, where the senior Rath started a small factory for the manufacture of beer kegs. The untimely death of his father in 1891 at the age of forty-nine left the younger Rath in charge of the family business, which he incorporated as the John Rath Cooperage Company. The company grew rapidly, due in part to the construction of a new factory and a substantial investment in automation, and by 1904 it employed sixty coopers and manufactured 100,000 barrels annually. By the start of World War I, the John Rath Cooperage Company was the second-largest manufacturer of high-grade brewers' cooperage in the United States, retaining an average work force of 150 craftsmen.

Besides his barrel-manufacturing company, Rath was involved with two other companies plus a variety of business and social organizations. In 1912, Rath started and became president of the Available Truck Company, which manufactured high-quality commercial trucks. In 1917, he organized the Chicago Sanitary Water Company, which chilled and bottled Wisconsin spring water for local Chicago clients. Rath was a member of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, the Manufacturers & Dealers League of Chicago, the Chicago Association of Commerce, and the National Manufacturers & Dealers Association. He was a Mason and was active in the Democratic party.

In 1922, Rath and his wife, Emma Fernitz Rath, sold the house to Henry Paschen, one of the founders of Paschen Brothers general contracting corporation. Paschen immediately deeded the house to his widowed mother, Theresa, who lived there until her death in 1939. The house remained in the Paschen family until 1962, making their tenure in the house the



ENTRANCE DETAIL, RESIDENCE OF JOHN RATH, CHICAGO
George W. Maher, Architect

THE INLAND ARCHITECT
AND NEWS RECORD
SEPTEMBER, 1908

The main entrance and staircase are located in a separate extension of the main house. Built-in flower boxes contribute to the naturalistic unity of the house and site. (from *Inland Architect and News Record*, Sept. 1908).

longest of any owner thus far. Theresa Paschen shared her house with her daughter and son-in-law, Mayme and Clayton F. Smith, who occupied the house from the time of its purchase in 1922 until their deaths.

Clayton Smith (1875-1962) was a prominent figure in Chicago politics, who held a variety of offices in his sixty-year public career. A native Chicagoan, Smith began his political career in 1900 when he became a paving inspector with the Board of Local Improvements. Smith rose quickly during the term of Mayor Carter H. Harrison, who appointed him vice-president of the Board of Local Improvements in 1911. Serving until 1915, Smith was involved in several major efforts of the Chicago Plan Commission, including the widening of North Michigan Avenue north of the Chicago River. For two years, beginning in 1915, Smith served as warden, or head administrator, of Cook County Hospital. He was city treasurer for two non-consecutive terms (1917-1919, 1921-1923) and served as 33rd Ward Alderman during the interim two years. He was deputy commissioner of city works from 1923 to 1927, then was elected as Cook County Recorder of Deeds for a four-year term that began in 1928. Smith reached the pinnacle of his political career when he was elected president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners in 1934, serving for three four-year terms. After 1946 he continued to serve on the County Board until his death on July 20, 1962 at the age of 87. A member of the Democratic party, he also served as 33rd Ward committeeman for many years, stepping down in 1956.

Smith also was involved in business and with a variety of social organizations. In 1900, he was a founder of Alliance National Bank, located at West Chicago and North Ashland avenues, serving as vice-president for a number of years. He belonged to several clubs, including the Royal Arcanum, the North American Union, and the City Club, and was a Mason. He was an early member of the Chicago Zoological Association and helped establish the Brookfield Zoo in 1934. In tribute to his many years of service to Cook County, the Cook County Board of Commissioners in 1957 named the 1,000-acre Clayton F. Smith Forest Preserve on Chicago's far North Side in his honor. He was a member of the Episcopal Church, as was his wife, Mayme Paschen, whom he married on June 27, 1901. She died in 1955 at the age of 78; the couple had no children.

The John Rath House Today

The design of the Rath House has survived virtually intact over its eighty-five year history. The house is a prominent feature of the Logan Square Boulevard Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. That designation highlights the development of this distinct leg of the Chicago boulevard system, and, in particular, the houses fronting on the street. Where the design of most of the houses along the boulevard reflect historical styles, the Rath House, according to historian Daniel Bluestone, "stands in striking contrast to the graystones dominating surrounding blocks."

The Rath House has undergone relatively few exterior changes during these years. The most unfortunate alteration was the loss of the decorative spandrel panels between the windows of the vestibule wing. The remainder of the important physical fabric of the exterior retains excellent integrity. Still in place are the finely carved wooden doors, the decorative stone brackets, and the handsome stained glass windows. Other window sash appears to be original, as does the gray slate shingle roof. Surrounded by mature landscaping on its corner lot, the John Rath House is an outstanding example of early twentieth-century progressive design and an important building facing one of Chicago's boulevards.

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